A Place for the Bodhisatta

A Place for the Bodhisatta:
The Local and the Universal in Jātaka Stories

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Abstract

Jātakas – stories about the past lives of the 'historical' Buddha – are often associated with specific locations, both within the land of Buddhism's birth, and in other parts of Asia. There are records suggesting that such locations became early pilgrimage sites; contemporary sources also make reference to 'local' jātakas, which in many cases help to assimilate Buddhism into the local culture through its geography. In this article I will argue that it is the structure of jātaka stories that allows this localisation to take place all over Asia. I contend that since the jātakas themselves are lacking in specific external referents they can easily be given a location, whilst their framing in the 'present' time of the Buddha's teaching career grounds the stories in both time and place, without infringing on the flexibility of the individual stories. This ability to provide centrally legitimated relevance for each and all contributes greatly to the popularity and endurance of the jātaka genre. The layering of meanings must remain if the stories are to accomplish this: if the stories become formally localised, for example by 19th century scholars who celebrate the jātakas' worth as records of life in early India, the power of the stories to transcend boundaries of time and place for their multiple audiences is lost. Yet if the jātakas were not anchored in the Buddha's teaching career in 5th century B.C.E. North India, their significance for Buddhists would in any case be negligible.

Introduction

In the introduction to their edited volume *Pilgrims, Patrons and Place: Localizing Sanctity in Asian Religions*, Granoff and Shinohara note that:

> sacred sites and the cults associated with them often seemed to be precariously balanced between the specific and the denial of that specificity.[1]

As I hope to demonstrate, this precarious balance is found in sacred sites associated with jātaka stories, that is stories relating episodes from the previous births of Gotama Buddha, when he was a *bodhisatta*, or 'being destined for

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Note: References to the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* (JA) are to V. Fausbøll, (ed.). *The Jātaka together with its commentary being tales of the anterior births of Gotama Buddha*, London: Trübner and Co, 1877-1896, and E. B. Cowell (ed.), *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, Cambridge, 1895-1907. References to the *Jātakamālā* (JM) are to J. S. Speyer (ed.), *The Jātakamālā: Garland of Birth-Stories of Ārya-Śūra*, London: Henry Frowde, 1895, and Peter Khoroche (trans.). *Once the Buddha was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. References to the *Cariyāpiṭaka* (CP) are to N. A. Jayawickrama (ed.), *Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpiṭaka*, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1974, and I. B. Horner (trans.), *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Part III: Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavaṃsa) and Basket of Conduct (Cariyāpiṭaka)*, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2000 (1975).

[1] Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (eds.). *Pilgrims, Patrons and Place: Localizing Sanctity on Asian Religions*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003, 2.

Awakening'.[2] At such sites, there is an assertion that the events of a jātaka quite literally *took place*, allowing the creation of a sacred landscape, and an assimilation of Buddhism into local culture. In the texts, the most well-known of which is the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* (henceforth JA), a large semi-canonical jātaka collection of the Theravāda school which remains very popular throughout Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the locations given to jātaka stories are formulaic at best, thus facilitating identifications all over Asia. Simultaneously, the established textual structure of jātaka stories, which necessitates an association with the person of the Buddha and the land of Buddhism's birth, gives the stories another level of specificity, which paradoxically brings with it the possibility of universal relevance.

In this article I will begin by outlining some of the roles that local jātakas play and have played in Buddhist countries. Following this I will examine how the local appropriation of such stories is made possible by the unspecific geography of jātakas in textual sources. As I then go on to argue, the very structure of a jātaka provides both these levels – the specific and the universal – thus making the jātaka genre the perfect medium through which Buddhism can be localised. The success of such endeavours, however, is endangered by modern discourses on the 'truth' of the stories. A brief examination of such problematic re-evaluations of the specificity of jātaka stories will help to draw together the importance of locality to the popularity and endurance of the genre.

Local Jātakas

That jātakas became identified with particular sites in North India, and that such sites became places of pilgrimage, is attested in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims. At the turn of the 5th century C.E., Faxian's journey took him past four great *stūpa*s each associated with a great sacrifice made by the Bodhisatta. The first (in 'So-ho-to') was where the Buddha ransomed the life of a dove with his own flesh; the second (in Gandhāra) where he gave away his eyes to a blind beggar;[3] the third and fourth (in Takshaśilā) where he gave away his head to a man, and his whole body to a starving tigress who was about to eat her own cubs,[4] and where 'kings, ministers, and peoples of all the kingdoms around vie with one

[2] I will consistently use the Pāli term *bodhisatta* to refer to Gotama Buddha in his previous births even when discussing non-Pāli sources. The Sanskrit equivalent *bodhisattva*, though frequently used with the same meaning as the Pāli, is also laden with Mahāyāna connotations.

[3] The character of King Sivi (Sibi, Śibi), who in Buddhism is identified with the Bodhisatta, is associated with many acts of self sacrifice. The gift of the eyes is recorded in chapter 2 'Śibi' of Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā* (henceforth JM), JA 499 'Sivi-jātaka', and I.8 'Sivirājacariyaṃ' of the Theravādin *Cariyāpiṭaka* (henceforth CP), amongst others. The story of his gift of flesh to ransom a dove is found in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as in several relatively late Buddhist sources. See Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 274-5 for a full list of versions, in an appendix to her excellent investigation into the nature and provenance of gift of the body stories in Buddhist texts. Also Leslie Grey, *A Concordance of Buddhist Birth Stories*, 2nd revised ed., Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994 (1990) 361ff.

[4] The story of King Candraprabha giving his head to a brahmin is found in the *Divyāvadāna* and the *Sūtra of the Wise and Fool* - see Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes*, 275-7. The tigress story is found in JM chapter 1 'Vyāghrī-jātaka', and is also known as the 'Mahāsattva-jātaka' – see Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes,* 279-80 for all versions. Though not in the JA or CP this story nonetheless found its way into the *Jinakālamālī*, a Pāli chronicle composed in Thailand in the early 16th century, and is popular in Southeast Asian Buddhism.

another in making offerings'.[5] A century later, Songyun writes of the same four sites, and also mentions a whole area associated with the *Vessantara-jātaka*.[6] Unlike Faxian, Songyun records that physical features in the landscape, as well as *stūpa* sites, are explained by such stories, for example:

> One li N.E. of the tower, fifty paces down the mountain, is the place where the son and daughter of the Prince persisted in circumambulating a tree (in order to escape from the Brahman who had begged them from their father as slaves). On this the Brahman beat them with rods till the blood flowed down and moistened the earth. This tree still exists, and the ground, stained with blood, now produces a sweet fountain of water.[7]

In his seventh century travelogue, Xuanzang adds several more jātaka sites, and includes stories of various supernatural events associated with them.[8]

Several scholars have drawn attention to the fact that such associations with jātakas were most popular in (greater) Gandhāra,[9] a place where no sites could reasonably be associated with the final birth of the Buddha. Lamotte comments, for example:

> Alongside Vārāṇasī which also claimed as its own Jātakas (the Six-Tusked White Elephant, the Partridge, the Deer and the Hare), Gandhāra was the only one to play the game – somewhat puerile, but profitable to the places of pilgrimage – of the acclimatization of the legends.[10]

Kuwayama adds that using relics and jātaka sites was necessary in this region since 'Gandhāra needed something around which Buddhists could gather and

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[5] James Legge (trans.), *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, being an account by the Chinese monk Fa-Hien of his travels in India and Ceylon (A.D. 399-414) in search of the Buddhist books of discipline*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1993 (1886), 32. The four *stūpa*s are described in chapters 9-11, p. 30-32.

[6] JM 9 'Viśvaṃtara'; JA 547 'Vessantara-jātaka'; CP I.9 'Vessantaracariyaṃ'. See Grey, *Concordance*, 438ff. for the many versions, and Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich (trans.), *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist Epic*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, for a study and translation of the JA version. This jātaka is believed in the Theravāda tradition to be the antepenultimate birth of the Bodhisatta, and is, according to Gombrich (*The Perfect Generosity,* i), in many places better known even than the Buddha's biography. Prince Vessantara's boundless generosity leads to him being banished to the forest, where he proceeds to give away his children and his wife.

[7] Samuel Beal (trans.), *Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-yun, Buddhist Pilgrims, from China to India (400 AD and 518 AD)*, London: Trübner & co, 1869, 195.

[8] For a summary of places associated with jātakas see Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Śaka Era,* trans. from French by S. Boin-Webb, Louvain la Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1988 (1958), 334-5, and for a study (and revisitation) of those in Gandhāra mentioned by Xuanzang see A. Foucher, *Notes on the Ancient Geography of Gandhara (A Commentary on a Chapter of Hiuan Tsang)*, trans. from French by H. Hargreaves, Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1915 (1902).

[9] Salomon uses 'greater Gandhāra' to refer to the region surrounding the Peshawar valley, including Taxila, Bamiyan and Gilgit. This area is characterised by the use of the Gāndhārī language, the Kharoṣṭhī script, and the Gandhāran artistic style. Richard Salomon, *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhāra, The British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments*, London: British Library, 1999.

[10] Lamottte, *History*, 335.

upon which Buddhism could find firm roots and ties with Mid-India.'[11] The identification of local features with jātakas, though clearly a calculated endeavour, was skilfully done, thus Foucher comments having visited the site identified by the Chinese pilgrims as that of the *Vessantara-jātaka*:

> On the whole their curiosity had ample reason to be satisfied. The *mise en scène* of the Jātaka was, as one sees, quite complete and most cleverly arranged. What doubt could there be, after so many palpable proofs, that this spot was the cradle of both the prince and the legend?[12]

The Gandhāran preoccupation with making Buddhism relevant locally is also evident in the recent manuscript finds, in relation to which Salomon notes:

> An important feature of the new manuscripts is the inclusion in some of them of local Gandhāran lore and traditions, which suggests that early Gandhāran Buddhism, and, by implication, perhaps the other regional centers of Indian Buddhism as well were more distinct and localized in their character than has previously been apparent.[13]

The localisation of jātaka stories in this region was thus part of a visible strategy for associating this newly Buddhist land with the activities of the Buddha, and – vice versa – incorporating local features into the newly arrived religion.

Lamotte speaks of the tradition of appropriating jātakas as one whose time passed, as Buddhism pushed further and further away from its homeland, and once 'it was considered that the Jātakas no longer sufficed to confer an adequate guarantee of authenticity on the new holy land and a story was made up of a journey by the Buddha to the North-West'.[14] Certainly, traditions of the Buddha's visits to regions outside of his homeland play an important part in the legitimisation of Buddhism in distant lands. However, this did not replace the tradition of identifying jātakas with particular sites: for example Namobuddha, near Panauti in present day Nepal, remains a popular pilgrimage site with Newar Buddhists, who hold that it is where the Bodhisatta sacrificed himself to the tigress.[15] In a part of Eastern Thailand inhabited by the Laopuan people, there is a town associated with the characters and events of the *Mahā-Ummagga-jātaka*, and in several cases other jātakas have been 'expanded with explanations attached to the story or with episodes invented by the villages to explain puzzling incidents or geographic features in the community.'[16] Stories are not only adapted to fit localities, but also composed anew, for example the many 'apocryphal' jātaka stories found in mainland Southeast Asia.[17] The localisation of Buddhism in this

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[11] Shoshin Kuwayama, "The Buddha's Bowl in Gandhāra and Relevant Problems" in *South Asian Archaeology 1987*, ed. Maurizio Taddei, Rome: Istituto Italiano Per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990, 962.
[12] Foucher, *Notes*, 30.
[13] Salomon, *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls*, 10.
[14] Lamotte, *History*, 335.
[15] David N. Gellner, *Monk, Householder and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 120.
[16] Pranee Wongthet, "The Jataka Stories and the Laopuan Worldview", *Asian Folklore Studies* 48, 1 (1989): 23-4. JA 546 'Mahā-ummagga-jātaka', though the story related to Wongthet – of 'Pra Mahosotha' – is named after the wise hero (the Bodhisatta), who is chief advisor to the king and praised for his great wisdom. Much of the local area is associated with Mahosadha's wooing of his equally clever wife Amarā(devī) – a minor subplot in the JA but much expanded in the local version.
[17] See Peter Skilling, "Jātaka and Paññāsa-jātaka in South-East Asia", *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 28 (2006): 113-73 for a discussion of such texts. Canonicity is by no means a simple concept in relation to jātaka stories: the JA is actually a

way is both an oral and literary tradition, in 'canonical' and vernacular languages, and can also serve to assimilate Buddhism into local literary traditions. For example, Monius notes in her study of the *Maṇimēkalai*, a sixth century Tamil Buddhist story that is identified as a jātaka of a future buddha:

> Through complex and creative processes of translation and elaboration, and through marshaling other local texts to support its worldview, the *Maṇimēkalai* domesticates a great tradition and an immense community, locating the lives and values of the Buddha and his followers in the local literary culture.[18]

The localization of Buddhism through jātakas is just one way to provide local relevance and authority to an otherwise distant religious movement. This appropriation of narratives provides accessible pilgrimage sites, encourages pride in one's homeland and local culture and a legitimation of Buddhism's presence in lands far from where the Buddha lived and preached. It also facilitates the appropriation of local mythology and narrative, allowing Buddhism to assimilate into its new setting.

Placeless Jātakas

We can now see that jātakas have played, and continue to play, a significant role in making Buddhism a local system. The construction of narratives that identify jātakas with specific sites demonstrates a preoccupation with the locality; however, this preoccupation is counterbalanced by a realisation of the larger situation. There appear to be two directions of movement: local stories, motifs, or geographic oddities can be absorbed into a legitimate textual genre of Buddhism and intimately associated with its founder; and stories can be taken from this religious genre and given local significance, reworked to suit the local situation. In both cases there are two layers at play: centralised authority, and local and personal relevance. The former provides the stability and unity of belonging to an established religious group (or even lineage of disciples/followers of the Buddha). The latter makes relevant this religion, which is distant in time and in space (not to mention culture and language[19]), to the local people. Each layer complements the other.

The local-ness of jātaka stories thus relies upon the fact that jātakas are not a local genre, but a well-attested Buddhist phenomenon. It also relies upon the fact that most stories do not contain a concrete association with any specific place. This is not to say that specific places (and names and times) are not mentioned within stories. In the JA, each jātaka begins with a description of the setting in which the events took place, the vast majority beginning 'In the past, when Brahmadatta was ruling in Varanasi, the Bodhisatta took birth as ...'. According to Jones, 395 of the 547 jātakas in the JA take place during Brahmadatta's reign.[20] In a passage in the *Kṣudrakavastu* of the

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commentary on canonical verses, yet remains more popular than the fully canonical CP. Later Southeast Asian collections are often a mixture of reworkings of JA stories and new compositions, and others have sources/parallels in Sanskrit and Chinese sources. Issues of canonicity in relation to such stories are clearly more worrying to Buddhologists than Buddhists.

[18] Anne E. Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-Speaking South India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, 87.

[19] For reasons of brevity I am not including issues relating to vernacularisation or canonical imitation in this study, both of which also play their part in locating jātakas.

[20] John Garrett Jones, *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha: The Jataka Stories in Relation to the Pali Canon*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979, 23.

Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya studied by Schopen, instructions are found for monks who cannot remember the actual situations of certain discourses:

> " ... those who forget the name of the place, etc., must declare it was one or another of the six great cities, or somewhere where the Tathāgata stayed many times. If he forgets the name of the king, he must declare it was Prasenajit; if the name of the householder, that it was Anāthapiṇḍada ... of the place of a story of the past, that it was Vāraṇāsī, of the king, that it was Brahmadatta; ..."[21]

Schopen suggests that the JA must have been guided by a similar injunction;[22] the result is a very formulaic set of locations. As well as Varanasi, several other locations recur, as time and time again ascetics retreat to the Himalayas, and young brahmins are sent to Takkasilā for their education. Such standard formulae locate most jātakas in North India, yet this rather spurious precision betrays a lack of interest in the 'true' location of the events of the story. Where places are specified, they are not given in detail (there is no reference to how to find the place in contemporary times), and many are not given a location at all. In the early textual sources, the association between jātakas and specific places appears rather irrelevant, making later associations all the more straightforward.

Although apparently very specific, the formulaic nature of the places in jātakas also allows them to shift locations, or become associated with several locations simultaneously. A good example of this is the *Aśvarāja* story, a jātaka that relates how some merchants are shipwrecked on an island, seduced by demonesses and eventually rescued by a flying horse (the Bodhisatta). There are many different versions of this story, and the variations between them include the location. Initially, the association is with Sri Lanka, and the story is even recounted by Xuanzang as a story of the origin of the Sinhalese people, but the Newar version moves this location to the Himalayas to transform the story into a warning for traders planning a trip to Tibet.[23] The *Vessantara-jātaka*, though strongly associated with a pilgrimage centre in Gandhāra, is also believed by some to have taken place in northeast Thailand.[24] In addition, the flexibility of the setting of a jātaka is evident in the pictorial representations of jātakas found in temples and on manuscripts, which tend to reflect the land and culture contemporary with the painting, with no concern for the historicity or place of the stories. Thus we see the Bodhisatta in 18th century Burmese court dress, or travelling in a clipper ship, and, as Griswold points out, 'the happy anachronism serves as a reminder that the lessons the tales teach are timeless' – we might, of course, add that they are placeless.[25]

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[21] Gregory Schopen, "If You Can't Remember, How to Make It Up: Some Monastic Rules for Redacting Canonical Texts" in *Bauddhavidyāsudhākaraḥ: Studies in Honour of Heinz Bechert on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Petra Kieffer-Pülz and Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Swisttal-Odendorf, 1997, 575.
[22] ibid., 578.
[23] Samuel Beal (trans.), *Si-yu-ki, Buddhist Records of the Western World, Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (A.D. 629)*, London: Trübner & co, 1884, II: 240-6; Todd T. Lewis (trans.), *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000, 54-80. See Naomi Appleton, "The Story of the Horse-King and the Merchant Siṃhala in Buddhist Texts", *Buddhist Studies Review* 23, 2 (2006): 187-201 for a full bibliography of versions, as well as an analysis of some of the main variations.
[24] P. Jory, "Thai and Western Buddhist Scholarship in the Age of Colonialism: King Chulalongkorn redefines the Jatakas", *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, 3 (2002): 897.
[25] A. B. Griswold's introduction to Elizabeth Wray, Clare Rosenfield, Dorothy Bailey and Joe D. Wray, *Ten Lives of the Buddha: Siamese Temple Paintings and Jataka Tales*, New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1972. An example of the latter

Some people argue that it is essential that jātaka stories are not associated with any specific place, for it is this that allows them to function as fables or folktales. For example, one of Sri Lanka's leading psychiatrists, Dr. D. V. J. Harischandra, provides a host of examples of how he uses jātaka stories in therapy.[26] His appreciation of the worth of the *Jātaka-Pota* (the Sinhalese version of the JA) is primarily due to it being a hugely diverse collection of ancient stories which can be effectively used in 'bibliotherapy' and 'psychodrama' (therapeutic role-play). Harischandra notes that the non-specific nature of the time and place of the stories is significant, for this allows the reader/hearer to identify more easily with the characters and story. In jātakas, not only is the location of the story of the past very formulaic, in both time and place, even the characters are not given proper names. In many cases they are referred to simply as 'the hare', 'the merchant', and so on; in other cases they are given a name that is a simple reflection of their appearance. There is a similar policy in fairytales, with characters such as Goldilocks and Cinderella.[27] For child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, such vagueness is essential in allowing fairy stories to resonate with 'everyman', thus 'facilitating projections and identifications'.[28]

Just as the lack of character names allows individuals to identify with people in jātaka stories, so also the lack of specific place allows communities to do the same. A beginning such as 'In the past, when Brahmadatta was ruling in Varanasi', or 'Once upon a time in a land far far away', doesn't distance the story from the audience, but actually allows it to come closer. In any case, although many jātaka texts appear to provide a location for each jātaka story in this formulaic way, in reality traditions outside of this text accept many different ideas about where the stories occurred. Thus locality and universality are in a careful balance. And this careful balance, as we are about to see, is reflected in the structure of jātakas themselves.

Jātakas of the Jeta Grove

In the jātakas of the JA there are actually two settings and two sets of characters. In addition to the 'story of the past' (*atīta-vatthu* – considered to be the jātaka proper), the 'story of the present' (*paccuppanna-vatthu*) gives the occasion on which the Buddha told the jātaka, for example whilst staying in the Jeta grove, in order to instruct a wayward monk. At the end of the jātaka, in the *samodhāna* ('connection'), he reveals which of the characters in the story are actually those involved in the 'present' situation, including, of course, himself. The story of the present might in some cases be representative of an actual historical situation, but in most cases it is deeply formulaic and clearly as much a part of the carefully constructed narrative as the story of the past. Although not all

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may be found on an illustration of the *Mahājanaka-jātaka* at Wat No, Suphanburi (plate 6, p. 34). Freely portraying the Bodhisatta/Buddha in contemporary settings is also a feature of Burmese paintings - Patricia M. Herbert *The Life of the Buddha*, London: British Library, 1993, 12.

[26] D. V. J. Harischandra, *Psychiatric Aspects of Jataka Stories*, Galle, Sri Lanka, 1998.

[27] ibid., 95.

[28] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, 40. Also 62 for a discussion of the vague nature of place and time. The fact that the Bodhisatta is always a male character might restrict the identifications of 'everywoman', though there are other female characters in both jātakas and other Buddhist stories. For an examination of the portrayal of women in jātakas and their exclusion from the bodhisatta-path see Naomi Appleton, "Temptress on the Path: Women as Objects and Subjects in Buddhist Jātaka Stories" in *New Issues in Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Pamela Anderson, Springer, forthcoming.

jātakas in the JA have an elaborate story of the present, and other jātaka texts are much less likely to have a frame story at all, this basic structure is nonetheless always present. A jātaka is a story of an event in a previous lifetime of the Buddha, as remembered and told by the Buddha.[29] It is thus necessarily *buddhavacana*, and so the 'story of the present', or at least the setting in the teaching career of the Buddha, is always implicit.

In the JA, the location in which the Buddha tells a jātaka is more often than not the Jeta Grove – in fact Feer counted 410 stories where this is the case.[30] Most often the audience is the *saṅgha*, though sometimes kings or laypeople. The setting is thus explicitly one of Buddhist instruction; this compensates somewhat for the lack of explicit Buddhist content in the vast majority of jātaka stories. The setting is also both historically and geographically specific, and can be verified by visiting the places in which the Buddha taught; the location of the story-telling is thus accessible, at least in theory. The setting of all the stories is in one region and one time period, in contrast to the cosmic cycles traversed in the jātakas, and made explicit in related texts that outline the patterns of the births of the previous buddhas.[31] The very specific nature of the setting of the stories thus allows the flexibility to remain within the individual jātakas, whilst authenticating them and drawing them into a verified and accessible Buddhist milieu.

This set structure established in the JA allowed the absorption of many stories into this specifically Buddhist genre. Almost any story could become a jātaka with the simple association of one character (or even a totally silent and uninvolved witness[32]) with the Bodhisatta, and the placing of the story within the teaching career of the Buddha. Thus the collection has parallels in Greek myth and fable, and pan-Indian stories (including Indian epic),[33] and the result is an incredibly diverse collection. The absorption of stories was not limited to the JA, however. Instead, the established structure of the jātakas of the JA – what Skilling therefore suggests we call the 'classical jātakas' – was later emulated in numerous 'apocryphal' stories and collections. Skilling records many of these in mainland Southeast Asia, some well defined collections in the canonical language (such as the text edited and translated by the Pali Text Society under the title *Paññāsajātaka*) and others circulating in the vernacular languages, often with no real fixed form.[34] The 'apocryphal' nature of these stories allows them to

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[29] This is not an entirely unproblematic definition, though it is in accord with the vast majority of primary and secondary literature on the subject. There is not room to discuss the issues here; they are discussed in full in my PhD thesis.

[30] T. W. Rhys-Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1999 (1880), 245. We might note that the *vinaya* text quoted earlier displays a natural bias towards setting all discourses in Sāvatthi, where the Jeta Grove is located (Schopen, "If you can't remember").

[31] In the Theravāda canon, the *Buddhavaṃsa*, which is elaborated upon in the *Nidānakathā* to the JA, provides an account of the 24 previous buddhas. It is at the feet of these past buddhas that the person who later becomes Gotama Buddha is predicted to buddhahood.

[32] It is a common misconception about jātaka stories (encouraged by the texts themselves) that the main character (the 'hero') must be the Bodhisatta. In the JA especially, stories are included where the Bodhisatta merely passes by and makes a comment, or doesn't say or do anything at all. He also lies, steals, murders and commits sexual impropriety.

[33] The direction of movement is of course hotly contested, but the point here is that the collection is able to be immensely diverse and inclusive, because of its set structure.

[34] Padmanabh S. Jaini, (ed.). *Paññāsajātaka or Zimme Pannāsa (in the Burmese Recension)*, London: Pali Text Society, 1981-3; I.B. Horner and Padmanabh S. Jaini (trans.). *Apocryphal Birth-Stories (Paññāsa-Jātaka)*, Oxford: Pali Text

incorporate material that would not be acceptable in the JA. For example, one story portrays the Buddha-to-be as a female character, before the vow made at the feet of Dīpaṅkara Buddha made rebirth as a woman impossible.[35] It is because the structure of jātakas is maintained, that such additions to the collection are possible.

Just as jātakas can domesticate and localise Buddhism precisely because the jātaka genre provides a centralised and universal context, so the very specific setting of the stories in the teaching career of the Buddha allows diversity to prosper. The stories of the present provide anchorage in both space and time, so the jātakas themselves are never really floating free, though they are allowed a great deal of flexibility. That they remain on a long chain is crucial to their popularity and endurance. Unfortunately, this has lately not been appreciated.

Jātakas of the Orient

When jātakas began to be studied by Western scholars in the late 19th century, there was a great interest in their 'historical' worth. The first scholar to examine thoroughly the JA, T. W. Rhys-Davids, described it as 'full of information on the daily habits and customs and beliefs of the people of India, and on every variety of the numerous questions that arise as to their economic and social conditions,'[36] and throughout the past century many scholars have seen the collection primarily as 'a storehouse of information about life and society in ancient India'.[37] As was the case for Indian texts in general, few scholars wanted to take an approach to jātakas that saw them as literature. Their literary value was seen as minimal, thanks to the large amount of repetition and omission, as well as the sometimes crude contents. In any case they were stories - low culture – thus the only other interest in them was as folklore, albeit as 'the most reliable, the most complete, and the most ancient collection of folklore now extant in any literature in the world.'[38] In addition, the jātakas were presented as having little of Buddhist relevance to them, since they were deemed to be pre-Buddhist and solely for the entertainment or edification of the laity, as a 'basic instrument of popular education'.[39]

These strands of scholarship on jātakas opened up interest in the stories, yet simultaneously shut off many interesting avenues of research; only recently have jātakas been seen as worthy of serious academic study as examples of religious literature. Such scholarship has also influenced attitudes towards jātakas within South and Southeast Asia. In a Sri Lankan journal, Peris ended an article

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Society, 1985-6. See Skilling, "Jātaka and Paññāsa-jātaka" for an examination of the whole tradition.

[35] The timescale of the JA, though vast, is limited to the period after the first prediction to buddhahood, as is made explicit in the *Nidānakathā*. According to Theravādin buddhology, after this time it is impossible for the Bodhisatta to be born as a female, so none of the jātakas of the JA portray him even as a female animal.

[36] T. W. Rhys-Davids, *Buddhist India*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999 (1903), 189.

[37] Benoychandra Sen, *Studies in the Buddhist Jātakas (Tradition and Polity)*, Calcutta: Saraswat Press, 1974, i.

[38] Rhys-Davids, *Buddhist India*, 208. For Rhys-Davids, the fact that jātakas are ancient folklore is what gives them historical value, since they provide insight into more "primitive" cultures, and form 'a priceless record of the childhood of our race' (*Buddhist Birth Stories*, lxxix). Though he acknowledged the importance of all the other information contained in the stories, this was not where his own interests lay.

[39] D. C. Pierce, "The Middle Way of the Jataka Tales", *The Journal of American Folklore* 82, 325 (1969): 245.

on the (often morally-dubious and un-Buddhist) characterisation of the Bodhisatta in the jātakas of the *Jātaka-Pota* with the conclusion:

> That they are to any extent genuine past-birth experiences of the Buddha, brought to light by his power of past-birth recollection, is thus not possible to be maintained as an educated view – and much less as an educated Buddhist view. To go beyond this and indiscriminately accept them as reflecting the Bodhisatta character would indeed be positively naive – if it were not also positively damaging of it.[40]

Such a conclusion betrays a preoccupation in contemporary Sri Lanka with establishing Buddhism as a 'rational' religion, with some testable foundation.[41] The 'truth' of the stories is thus under question as intimately related to their value.

Despite debates about the 'truth' of the stories, jātakas remain incredibly popular in Sri Lanka, whether in sermons, children's books, television programmes, radio plays or films. However, in Thailand the influence of the Western scholarly agenda on its narrative collections was more strongly felt. Jory tells of how in 1904 King Chulalongkorn published an essay about jātakas that was heavily based upon Rhys-David's book *Buddhist India*. His essay was widely circulated and strongly influenced Thai attitudes to and interpretations of jātakas. His main aim was to disassociate jātakas from Buddhism and Thailand, by showing that they are in fact merely pre-Buddhist Indian folktales:

> No longer acceptable as stories of the Buddha's former lives, the Jatakas were now to be read either as parables with a moral, or for those with more scholarly interests, as folktales (*nithan boran*) containing a wealth of information about how ancient peoples of foreign countries lived.[42]

King Chulalongkorn achieved this by introducing a new conception of both time and place – the stories were delocalised and made 'foreign', and the idea of linear historical time allowed for their designation as 'pre-Buddhist', a conception of time that is alien to the jātakas. By so doing, King Chulalongkorn reduced the relevance of jātakas to Thai Buddhists.[43]

Conclusion

Viewing jātakas in terms of their historically and geographically specific origins, instead of their historically and geographically vague events, has the potential to undermine their relevance for Buddhists. We must be wary of the idea that whether or not the stories actually took place is more important than any metaphorical, allegorical, or psychological content the stories might have. An

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[40] Merlin Peris, "The Jātaka Bodhisatta", *Sri Lankan Journal of the Humanities* 22 (1996): 62.

[41] I was lucky enough to have a conversation with Professor Peris where he outlined some of the reactions to his article, and others where he argues for Greek influence on jātakas and *vaṃsa* material (University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, May 2007). I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at the University of Peradeniya who helped me to understand the place of jātakas in Sri Lankan culture better during two visits between December 2006 and May 2007.

[42] Jory, "King Chulalongkorn redefines the Jatakas", 897.

[43] Jory (ibid.) argues that the king's redefinition of jātakas was a political move, a way of redefining political powers, and thus the very power of jātakas over the populace was central to his reforms. The current place of jātakas in Thailand is ambivalent – they are still present in art, theatre, and sermons, yet their popularity is slight in comparison with other Theravādin countries.

example of this attitude is provided by Copleston, Bishop of Colombo, who wrote in 1884 that the stories of the present did have some worth as ethical guides:

> These are the examples and proofs of virtue which, regarded as historical, do credit to Buddhism, - infinitely more credit than fictitious accounts of exaggerated and unnatural applications of the rules of virtue on the part of stags or of hares, or of human beings in some other stage of the world.[44]

His interpretation that the stories need to be at least 'regarded as historical' to give them any worth is to a certain extent mirrored in Buddhism; we saw, for example, that tying a story to the time and place and person of the Buddha gave it legitimation.[45] This legitamate and specific setting is, however, counterbalanced by the flexibility of the stories of the past, which have the potential to show the Bodhisatta's actions in times and places far away from fifth century B.C.E. North India. Such flexibility makes the stories a rich source for our understanding of specific local concerns.

Wherever the jātakas did or did not take place, there is much of value – to both Buddhists and Buddhologists – to be found in the stories, if one looks in the right places. Just one of these places has been examined here: as we have seen, the location of jātaka stories is in a very precarious balance, and where this balance has been tipped – by local sites or stories – much can be revealed about the complex interaction of local cultures and Buddhism, or as McDaniel puts it, 'the simultaneous processes of Buddhist acculturation and the construction of a regional cultural independence.'[46] The careful balance must not be tipped too far, however: the layers of narrative must be allowed to coexist, as they have done for more than two millennia, if we are to come to a nuanced understanding of the place of jātakas in diverse historical and social contexts.

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[44] Bishop R. S. Copleston, "Papers on the First Fifty Jātakas", *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8, 2, 28 (1884): 111.

[45] It is of course worth pointing out that different societies and individuals regard different events as historically plausible; for many Buddhists both the story of present and the jātaka proper (the story of the past) are historically plausible, if not actually statements of historical fact. A Buddhist might in any case note that speculating about where jātakas took place does not aid spiritual progress, and refer to the Buddha's declaration that asking questions that are not conducive to the spiritual path is akin to a man refusing to be treated for a poisoned-arrow wound until he knows the height of the person who shot him and the variety of feather on the arrow (found in the 'Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta' *Majjhima Nikāya* 63). The famous 'unanswered questions' do not, of course, include the reality of his previous births, but the analogy is still, I think, a fruitful one.

[46] Justin McDaniel, "Creative Engagement: *Sujavaṇṇa Wua Luang* and its Contribution to Buddhist Literature", *Journal of the Siam Society* 88, 1&2 (2000): 160.